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**INTELLIGENCE COMMUNITY STAFF**

28 January 1976

MEMORANDUM FOR: Mr. William Nelson  
Mr. Angus Theurmer

1. At the conclusion of a speech to the Wednesday Club of St. Louis, Missouri, on 28 January 1976, where I was substituting for General Walters, I opened the floor to questions. One of the questions, concerning covert action, was particularly tough and provocative. I winged the answer as best I could.

2. Because of the complexity of this subject, however, and the fact that I may have gotten myself out on a limb, I endeavored to recapture the essence of my reply on a piece of paper while flying back to Washington that same afternoon. The answer, as reconstructed, is attached for your information, as well as for your or anyone else's critique.

**SIGNED**

Samuel V. Wilson  
Lieutenant General, USA  
Deputy to the DCI for the  
Intelligence Community

Attachment

cc: General Walters

**INFORMATION**  
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(EXCLUDED FROM REGISTRY FILE IC)

The Wednesday Club of St. Louis, Missouri  
28 January 1976

(Question and Answer Session)

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Question:

Is covert action necessary? Should we have more of it? Less of it? Or none at all?

Answer:

When we talk about covert action, let's make sure we know what it is. Generally speaking, this can be regarded as a broad, almost euphemistic term covering a wide spectrum of activities ranging from mild, practically benign, "within-the-law" measures to quiet, behind-the-scenes manipulation and even influence peddling, to the extreme of stealth and violent but hidden action. It ranges from the legal, morally justified to the questionable, to the morally abhorrent and repugnant (depending, of course, on where we may be located on the spectrum of conflict at the time).

When you add \$20 to your son's Christmas savings so that he may buy his father an electric shaver and get full credit for his act, you have engaged in a covert act of manipulation.

When you work behind the scenes and in secret to collar the majority votes of the PTA or the school board before proposing your candidate for chairman, having secretly arranged for a friend to second the nomination, you again are manipulating covertly. Should you further arrange for another friend to move immediately that nominations be closed, I would call you a consummate covert operator engaging in a covert political action.

When I respond privately to a request for advice by a foreign politician running for election, and I sit with him in my study and help him write his speeches and develop his political platform, some would maintain that I am engaging in covert action.

Several years ago, the daughter of an American official stationed abroad in a Communist-controlled country was dating the son of a highly placed local national, unbeknownst to her parents. One night she put her boy friend in the trunk of her car and drove him through the checkpoint and across the border to freedom. While she was acting solely on her own, that was an example of covert action.

There are many examples: the "Jackal" attempting to get deGaulle of France in the crosshairs of his sniper rifle scope is at the morally repugnant extreme; the OSS working behind the Japanese lines in Burma in World War II; the Vietcong in South Vietnam; the Soviets and Cubans in Angola; the CIA helping the Shah of Iran regain his throne in 1953; anti-Communist leaflets in a Soviet military barracks in East Germany; health services rendered in secret to a foreign potentate in an American hospital; all may be considered forms of covert action.

The point is there are many and varied types of covert actions. Some we would consider useful and good, according to our purpose and the situation obtaining at the time; some we might consider morally unjustified except under extreme conditions, such as war.

The second point is simply--everyone plays.

The third point is--the closer we get to conflict, the more important covert actions can become. In a total war situation, covert action is an essential capability, one that cannot be created overnight. So, at the very least, we need to keep it alive, as a tool in reserve.

The key is control and wisdom at the top.